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ABSTRACT

Six strategies for using reflective narratives to promote the professional development of school leaders are briefly described in this paper, which is designed to accompany "School Leadership: Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders." Narratives are characterized by subjective perceptions that are shaped by personal value systems, serving as a catalyst for individual growth. The six strategies include: (1) the reflective writing strategy, an analysis of personal accounts of leadership incidents; (2) the information gap strategy, an analysis of unaddressed questions; (3) the mental set strategy, an examination of personal belief/value systems; (4) the Columbo strategy, which involves the use of inferential reasoning; (5) the "If This Were to Happen to Me" strategy, an application of generic problems to individual situations; and (6) the "What If" speculation strategy, which entails planning for realistic interventions. (LMI)

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FAR WEST LABORATORY

Strategies for Using Reflective Writing to Promote Professional Development:

A Guide for Using

"School Leadership Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders"

By:

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November, 1990

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ABOUT FAR WEST LABORATORY

Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (FWL) serves the four-state region of Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah, working with educators at all levels to plan and carry out school improvements. The mission of FWL is to challenge and enable educational organizations and their communities to create and sustain improved learning and development opportunities for their children, youth, and adults. To accomplish its mission, FWL directs resources toward: advancing knowledge; developing products and programs for teachers and learners; providing assistance to educational agencies; communicating with outside audiences to remain informed and to inform others about the results of research, development, and exemplary practice; and creating an environment where diverse educational and societal issues can be addressed and resolved. Copies of *School Leadership: Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders* and additional copies of this Guide can be obtained by contacting Tom Ross, Information Specialist, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, California 94107 (415) 565-3044.

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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is designed to accompany Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development's *School Leadership: Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders*. In it, we suggest six strategies for using the reflective narratives published in *School Leadership* to promote the professional development of school leaders. Written by 50 school administrators, the reflective narratives have the potential of helping educators examine a wide variety of beliefs, issues, and strategies related to instructional leadership and school reform. The narratives are not intended as examples of "expert practice" or as models depicting "the most effective ways" to achieve school improvement goals. They do, however, illustrate the work realities of educational leaders as seen through the eyes of 50 different school administrators who have tried to improve their schools or school districts. Like all reflections on professional practice, the narratives are based on highly subjective perceptions that have been filtered through personal value/belief systems. It is precisely this characteristic that makes the reflective narratives such a potentially valuable resource for others committed to their own professional development. The reflections of the contributing authors can serve as a catalyst for other individuals' reflections and growth. In the process, both aspiring and practicing school administrators can learn more about themselves and how they can better affect change in the contexts of their respective organizations. It is with this latter goal in mind that this Guide has been developed.

School Leadership—Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders can be used in a variety of ways to promote the professional development of other school leaders. Six basic strategies are offered here. However, a number of other possibilities could be generated by those who are interested in using the reflective narratives as a vehicle for professional development. For example, one approach not emphasized in this Guide that might have value for some individuals is to read the narratives and identify other ways that the reflections could be used to promote professional development. Each of the six strategies presented is based on the assumption that the real learnings will not necessarily come from the narratives themselves but from using these materials as "springboards" into the readers' our work realities—raising questions about how the readers' attitudes and actions promote or impede educational excellence.

1. *The Reflective Writing Strategy*

The school administrators who authorized the reflective narratives were in general agreement that writing them was a valuable professional development experience in its own right. The vast majority of the authors claimed that the experience helped them to learn from their on-the-job activities on ways that will help them perform more effectively in the future. If this is true—and there is a great deal of experiential evidence and some research to suggest that it is, (Shulman, 1989; Nelson, 1989), then it seems appropriate to try to encourage others to pursue the written reflection route.

The written materials in Far West Laboratory's *School Leadership—Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders* can serve as concrete examples and/or models for educators who might want to try their own reflective writing. People could be asked to read a selection of the narratives and try producing a similar account. They also could analyze some of the narratives to identify the underlying structural frameworks, then generate a list of questions whose answers could form an outline for future reflective writings. Such an analysis might yield the following types of questions:

- Within what type of context do you work?
- What is your formal leadership role and how did you get there?
- What was a critical incident that occurred that you feel had a significant impact on your school or district?
- What do you feel happened in this incident and what specifically did you do as a leader as the incident unfolded?
- What type of impact did this incident have—positive or negative?
- What factors do you feel were responsible for this incident's ultimate impact—and why?
- What did you learn as a leader from this experience?

Our experience suggests that school leaders are much more receptive to written reflectiveactivities when they are provided with specific examples of the "products" that they will be expected to produce and concrete strategies for producing these "products." The reflective narrative can be utilized in a way that will provide others both of these kinds of support.

2. *The Information Gap Strategy*

A review of any one of the narrative descriptions contained in *School Leadership—Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders* will result in a number of unanswered questions in the mind of the reader. In many ways, thinking about these questions and their implications represent a crucial sensitivity that anyone occupying a position of leadership must develop. These unanswered questions reflect information gaps—discrepancies between what is definitely known to be the case and what is not known. Individuals could be assigned a number of reflective narratives to read and then asked to identify the important questions that come to mind that are not addressed or go unanswered in the narrative. They also could be asked to project some of the negative consequences of not knowing the answers to the questions that they have identified, and to devise some actions that the leader could take to fill those information gaps. Finally, they could be encouraged to examine an important problem with which they currently are dealing and repeat the process of identifying the information gaps, projecting the possible negative consequences of those gaps, and devising strategies for filling those gaps. Analyzing the written reflections of others then can be used as a safe starting point for developing the type of sensitivity and skill that can be applied in their own back-home realities to strengthen their professional performance.

3. *The Mental Set Strategy*

Anyone in a leadership position sees the world and takes action on the basis of a complex set of assumptions, beliefs, and values. Many leaders are not aware of their mental sets and/or how those mental sets impact how they perceive things or respond to those perceptions. Individuals could be asked to read a selection of reflective narratives and to identify some possible unstated assumptions, beliefs and/or values that the authors might have had as they operated in the situations described. In addition, readers could be encouraged to look at how a mental set shaped a leader's actions. After completing this task, people then could identify a concrete situation that they currently are experiencing and systematically analyze their own mental sets and how those sets might shape their future behavior and, ultimately, their work environments. Finally, individuals could be prompted to consider the mental sets of others—especially those who are being resistant to their leadership—and to explore some ways of avoiding or reducing the possible tension or conflict between people with varying mental sets.

4. *The Columbo Strategy*

Peter Falk has become somewhat of a television legend by playing the role of Columbo—a policeman who specializes in solving murder mysteries. The character of Columbo is known for his skillful ability to identify clues and to draw inferences from them. When one reads many of the reflective narratives, he is struck by the existence of some behavior that, if projected beyond the time frame contained in the material, might very well lead to a leadership problem in the future. In other words, many of the written reflections contained some "clues" regarding problems that might develop in the future—potential problems with which the leader ultimately will have to deal. Individuals can be asked to read some selected written descriptions (e.g., #3, #5, #8, #19, #22, #24, #29, #35, #42, and #44) and identify some clues that suggest the possibility that future problems might arise. They also can be induced to explain on what basis they made those inferences and to suggest some actions that might be undertaken to avoid or to reduce the negative impact of those projected problems. Individuals then could be urged to apply this same approach to their own back-home situations. They could identify some current clues that might suggest future problems that they may have to confront, explain the rationale for their inferences, and identify some possible things that they could do to eliminate or reduce the negative consequences of these projected problems.

5. *"If This Were To Happen To Me" Strategy*

A number of the reflective narratives present descriptions of school leaders confronting "classic" problems that are generic and can occur at any type of school in any type ofcommunity (e.g., #5, #11, #19, #21, #26, #28, #44, and #45). After reading them, individuals could be required to analyze how they would deal with the generic problems described if they would occur in their own situations. They would have to think about their own operating styles and belief systems, the organizational climates in their own schools, the existing organizational norms of the places in which they work, the past history of other change efforts, and determine what they would do if faced with the problems highlighted.

6. *"What If?" Speculation Strategy*

Many of the descriptions of leadership behavior contained in the narratives probably have been influenced by the "Angel Effect"—or the tendency of the person who is describing an incident to unconsciously put him/herself in the best light. This is not an unusual occurrence especially when people know that they are writing something that might be read by superordinates, colleagues, and subordinates. Individuals can be urged to read some assigned set of the

reflective narratives and identify some examples of the leaders' behavior that seem too good to be true or of situations where everything fell too neatly into place. They could be asked to think about a problem that they currently are experiencing and to describe a "best case" scenario—what they will do to resolve the problem, why these actions will work, and how all of the elements for resolving the problem will fall into place. After completing this task, they could be required to think of two or more things that might occur that definitely would destroy their "best case"—things that they feel are unlikely to happen but possible given their knowledge of their own back-home situations. They are then expected to analyze those possibilities in terms of what they would do if those things actually occurred. In other words, they would answer the following questions, "What if _____ really did occur, what would I do, and why?" Finally, individuals would be encouraged to think about some of the things they learned from engaging in this "what if" speculation. They would then share insights or ideas that could help them strengthen their leadership effectiveness.

SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is important to re-emphasize that the six strategies for using the materials found in *School Leadership—Reflections on Practice by California's Instruction Leaders* are not intended to represent an all-inclusive listing of the ways that the reflective narratives can be used to promote professional development of school leaders. The possibilities for using these materials for professional development are only limited by the imaginations and initiative of those who use them. While each of the basic strategies highlighted in this guide can be implemented by individuals working independently with a minimum of supervision/monitoring, they all will have a greater chance for success if used in collegial work groups. In this latter setting, people can probe each other's thinking and force a type of clarity and analysis that rarely can be achieved by an individual working alone. In addition, when a number of different people are dealing with similar tasks, different perspectives and approaches inevitably emerge which tend to maximize individual learning. Efforts to assist educators to reflect on their complex on-the-job practice and to learn from that experience need to be initiated and supported. Hopefully, Far West Laboratory's *School Leadership—Reflections on Practice by California's Instructional Leaders* and this accompanying guide help to further this important professional development goal.